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## **DISCLOSING THE TRAUMA OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: A GENDER ANALYSIS**

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*This study qualitatively explored dynamics that impede or promote disclosure of child sexual abuse. Findings on the impact of gender on disclosure are reported based on data from 30 in-depth interviews of adult survivors. While there were strong similarities, noteworthy differences connected to gender and disclosure emerged. The overall trend was toward delaying disclosure, and for those who tried to disclose in childhood, attempts were often made in behavioral or indirect verbal ways. However, males reported difficulty disclosing because they feared being viewed as homosexual and as victims. Women's difficulties centered on feeling conflicted about responsibility, and they more strongly anticipated being blamed or not believed. Findings are linked to therapeutic work with traumatic loss.*

Loss associated with the trauma of child sexual abuse (CSA) has been well established. Loss of one's childhood and ability to trust in relationships, loss of emotional and psychological well-being, loss of control over one's body, and the potential loss of significant people in one's life when the perpetrator is a family member are among the numerous repercussions for sexually victimized children (Arata, 1998; Berliner & Conte, 1995; Finkelhor, 1990; Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Herman, 1992, 1997; van der Kolk, 1994, 1996). Accounts of sexually abused children describe their acute sense of feeling different or "damaged." Profound feelings of isolation and stigmatization experienced by sexually abused children all too frequently result in disenfranchisement from peers and their community (Finkelhor, 1990; Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). For many, the implications of these losses extend well into adulthood (Green, 1993). Complicating this picture are the

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concerning number of children who do not disclose their victimization. Unfortunately, nondisclosure, along with delaying and withholding disclosures of CSA, are phenomena all too common to this form of child victimization. Even when children do disclose, they may confront unexpected negative consequences including not being believed, being blamed and facing the breakup of their family (Paine & Hansen, 2002).

### **Review of the Literature**

It has been estimated that between 30% and 80% of victims do not purposefully disclose CSA before adulthood, a figure that has remained constant over the last 20 years of CSA research (Arata, 1998; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Roesler & Wind, 1994; Smith et al., 2000). This suggests that many children may endure sexual trauma throughout the course of their childhood and adolescence without receiving important support or necessary interventions. Researchers examining latency to disclosure (delay between the onset of sexual abuse and disclosure) report a wide range of time between victimization and disclosure, with a mean delay from 3–18 years documented across a number of studies (Kogan, 2004; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Oxman-Martinez, Rowe, Straka, & Thibault, 1997). For example, 64% of the women in Roesler and Wind's study (1994) did not disclose until adulthood. Arata (1998) also found that almost two thirds of the women in her sample had not told anyone at the time of the abuse, and Smith and colleagues (2000) estimated that close to one half (48%) of victimized girls in their national survey told no one for more than 5 years after the event and that 28% had not told anyone of their victimization until the research interview. These numbers are disturbing, as they suggest that not disclosing during victimization may be more common than disclosing, and that significant numbers of children may be left unresponded to and therefore untreated when suffering from negative effects. Delayed disclosure of sexual trauma signals the loss of a childhood free from victimization.

While disclosure is generally an understudied area of CSA, an emerging literature in determining complex processes underlying disclosure is steadily growing (Alaggia, 2004; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Gries et al., 2000;

Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Kogan, 2004; Paine & Hansen, 2002). This literature highlights the importance of understanding how contextual and individual factors interact to inhibit or promote disclosure in a child's life, including relationship to the perpetrator, child's age and gender, cultural issues, family dynamics, availability of social support, and environmental receptivity (Alaggia & Turton, *in press*; Everson, Hunter, Runyon, Edelsohn, & Coulter, 1989; Fontes, 1993; Gartner, 1999; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Kogan, 2004; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990).

Theories of disclosure offer important principles on which to base examination of disclosure and build further understanding. Approach and avoidance factors have been proposed as influencing a person's decision to disclose whereby anticipated consequences by the individual of disclosing will determine his or her actions (Omarzu, 2000). If an individual assesses the risks of telling to be greater than the rewards, disclosure will be suppressed (Fisher, Goff, Nadler, & Chinsky, 1988). Evidence indicates that there are indeed risks to revealing personal secrets, especially when these involve traumatic events (Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Kelly, Coenen, & Johnston, 1995). Omarzu (2000) further proposes that individuals will assess their situational context and disclose in varied degrees and amounts, depending on their reading of anticipated risks and benefits. This premise further supports the claim that disclosing is not a single event but rather a carefully measured process.

Social exchange theories have also been proposed as a means to understand disclosure (Leonard, 1996), and overall findings regarding the perceived advantages and disadvantages and the actual experienced risks and benefits of telling present contradictory information. On the one hand, disclosure can sometimes stop the progression of victimization, alleviate stress and associated symptoms, prevent hypervigilance around keeping the secret, and create opportunities to gain new insights and secure necessary treatment (Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Kelly et al., 1995; Vogel & Wester, 2003). In contrast, investigations of disclosures involving victimization and abuse reveal that telling may lead to negative consequences such as the person being blamed and/or accused of fabricating allegations, experiencing withdrawal of support and/or increases in victimization, and ultimately experiencing an

exacerbation of symptoms related to the abuse (Arata, 1998; Berliner & Conte, 1995; Henry, 1994; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Smith et al., 2000; Summit, 1983). When applying these concepts to CSA disclosure, it is presumed that disclosure will be circumvented or interrupted if perceived risks include losing control of the process and setting off a chain of reactions that are negative or increase risk. This notion is supported by CSA research that indicates disclosing involves potential risks and can precipitate undesirable reactions and negative consequences (Arata, 1998; Berliner & Conte, 1995; Nagel, Putnam, Noll, & Trickett, 1996; Sauzier, 1989).

Gries and colleagues (2000) also point out that disclosure is best viewed as “a dynamic rather than static event” (p. 33), and a number of others emphasize the importance of understanding disclosure as a process (Alaggia, 2004; Bradley & Wood, 1996; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Sorensen & Snow, 1991; Summit, 1983). Disclosures are often tentative, involve some telling and then retracting, can be partial or full, and occur over time. Within this framework of viewing disclosure as a process, specific factors seem to operate in individual situations of disclosure. Age, gender, relationship to the perpetrator, family dynamics, availability of support (especially parental), and cultural considerations have all been found to play some part in disclosure (Alaggia, 2001; Fontes, 1993; Gartner, 1999; Kogan, 2004; Roesler & Wind, 1994; Mian, Marton, & LeBaron, 1996; Vir Tyagi, 2001). Studies indicate that children under the age of 6 are least likely to disclose and that developmental factors may account for young children’s inability to disclose purposefully (Campis, Hebden-Curtis, & Demaso, 1993; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Kogan, 2004; Mian, Wehrspann, Klajner-Diamond, Labaron, & Winder, 1986; Nagel et al., 1996; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Sorensen & Snow, 1991). Kogan (2004) found that the likelihood of purposeful disclosure increases with age, with female victims between the ages of 7 and 13 more likely to tell an adult and older adolescents (14–17 years) more likely to tell a peer.

Relationship to the perpetrator is another factor cited for explaining why some child victims do not disclose (Mian et al., 1996). Wyatt and Newcomb (1990) found that the more closely victims are related to the perpetrator, the less likely they are to disclose CSA. When the perpetrator is a significant caregiver,

attachment issues, traumatic bonding, and the child's need to protect the integrity of the family unit are cited as possible explanations for withholding or delaying disclosure (Alexander, 1992; Hindman, 1989; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Summit, 1983).

Certain cultural issues may also act as deterrents to disclosure. In cultures that hold negative attitudes and taboos about discussing sexuality, disclosures of sexual victimization are more difficult to put forward. In addition, when CSA is perpetrated by a family member, disclosure may result in the breakup of the family, making disclosures for victims from cultural backgrounds that place a high premium on preservation of the family more complicated (Alaggia, 2001; Paine & Hansen, 2002). Further, structural factors such as discrimination, migration, and poverty have been identified as potential deterrents to disclosing CSA (Fontes, 1993). Children who are marginalized because of discrimination related to race, ethnicity, or poverty may feel too disempowered to disclose abuse. They may also fear being cut off from their cultural community and other negative consequences related to cultural attitudes and beliefs (Alaggia, 2001; Vir Tyagi, 2001).

In regard to gender, it has been proposed that boys are less likely to disclose for varied reasons, including the increased risk of stigmatization attached to males who admit to being victims. The fact that boys are more often abused by males frequently raises associated fears of being labeled homosexual, which, in a homophobic society, further prevents them from disclosing (Faller, 1989; Gartner, 1999; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Gries, Goh, & Cavanaugh, 1996; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Reinhart, 1987). In addition, sexual exploitation of boys by older women is often mistakenly viewed as desirable, and therefore their victimization is minimized or denied. These proposed explanations around boys disclosing remain speculative, since most have yet to be empirically challenged.

In light of investigative attempts aimed at understanding disclosure phenomena, little is known about how gender affects disclosure of CSA. The majority of extant studies have included only women in their samples, and while the prevalence of CSA is higher for females, a concerning number of males are known to experience sexual abuse in childhood. The purpose of the present study was to qualitatively explore dynamics that impede or promote disclosure by examining a range of factors including

gender as a dynamic. The remainder of this article reports on issues of gender, how disclosures of females and males are similar and different, and in what ways gender affects CSA disclosure.

### **Method**

The study took place in a large multicultural Canadian city. Nineteen female and 11 male survivors of CSA were interviewed about their disclosure experiences using the long-interview method (McCracken, 1988). Objectives of the study included identifying influences that inhibit or promote children's disclosure of CSA, and these objectives were addressed through the following questions: (a) From the perspective of the victims, what are the psychological tactics used by perpetrators of CSA to suppress disclosure? (b) In what specific ways do these tactics interact to have an impact on the victim's ability to disclose? and (c) What individual, familial, and environmental influences affect disclosure? These questions seemed best answered by employing an inductive, discovery-oriented qualitative design, as recommended for this type of investigation: "Qualitative studies which are able to track the individual experiences of children and their perception of the influences upon them which led to the disclosure of information are needed in order to complement the picture . . . of disclosure in the field of childhood rape" (Jones, 2000, p. 270).

Purposive sampling was implemented to capture the experiences of both women and men, along with those who disclosed during the abuse and those who withheld. Recruitment occurred through community agencies, two university campuses, and word of mouth (snowballing). Of the 38 participants who responded, 3 declined participation after reviewing the study requirements because of where they were at in their healing process, feeling the timing was not right for them. Six participants were eliminated from the analysis because their abuse experiences were qualitatively different (e.g., ritualistic, institutional), while others were "questioning" aspects of their victimization because they were in the process of recovering memories. Therefore, analysis of 30 participant narratives was used for theme development regarding the impact of gender on disclosure. Interviews were transcribed verbatim for open, axial, and selective coding as recommended for analysis of qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open

coding of the interviews involved detailed coding and resulted in the development of numerous categories and subcategories. The next stages of axial and selective coding involved collapsing categories and refining them into theme areas. Analysis throughout was facilitated with N\*Vivo software. After examining the data from the 30 interviews, and based on theme development, it was determined that categorical saturation had been reached.

Bearing in mind that in qualitative research transferability is the primary aim, reliability of the data were ensured through credibility, dependability, and confirmability, as typically used to establish trustworthiness in qualitative investigations (Drisko, 1997). In other words, the aim is to selectively examine a small number of cases intensively. In the present study, findings that emerged about individual and contextual factors related to disclosure can be considered for transferability to cases with similar characteristics. Sample characteristics are described in the following section. Further techniques to ensure trustworthiness included prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, and theoretical triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998).

## **Results**

### *Sample Characteristics*

Participants were 30 adult survivors between the ages of 18 and 65 years who were sexually abused by a family member or a trusted adult. The average age of the participants was 40.1 years; two thirds were female; 6% identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; average age of onset of abuse was 5.3 years; and the vast majority of the male perpetrators were biological fathers, step-fathers, mothers' partners, or grandfathers. Participants were of diverse socioeconomic status (upper middle class middle class, working poor, and homeless), 36% were non-White, 42% had disclosed the abuse during childhood and the remainder had not disclosed until adulthood, 30% had purposefully disclosed, and 26% had not disclosed because they had repressed the memory or the abuse had occurred in the preschool years and they had difficulty with recall.

As described subsequently, the themes that emerged support the similarities in disclosure between women and men but also

highlight the differences in the issues they struggle with. Discussed first are themes highlighting similarities.

*Delaying or Withholding Disclosure as a Common Pattern*

The overall trend for both women and men was toward delaying disclosure, with more than half the sample (58%) only disclosing well into adulthood. According to one female participant: "I was removed from my family because my sister was sexually abused by our father. Even though he had sexually abused me, while I was going through the investigation I never admitted to it. I didn't admit to anything until I was 12 years old [3 years later]. Then I began to tell everything to my counselor." Similarly, one male respondent explained: "My new friends were just guys talking about the facts of life one day and I'm all ears. So I was being told what was normal and what was not and I was devastated, very devastated. I ran, I literally ran from the conversation and couldn't tell the guys why I ran." He did not disclose until the age of 33 after a life of serious substance abuse, encounters with the law, and relationship breakdowns.

*Indirect Verbal and Behavioral Attempts to Disclose*

Among those who tried to disclose in childhood during the time of victimization, both females and males often first attempted to do so in behavioral, nonverbal, and indirect ways. As one female participant stated: "It was hard, you know, 'cause there would be days I'd come home all angry and she [mother] would be 'what's wrong?' 'Like nothing,' I'd say. 'Nothing is wrong, don't worry about it.' Yeah, I think at one point I didn't feel resentment to her, but it was like 'Why aren't you picking up on, you know, maybe I am dropping small hints, my moods?'" Similarly, one male participant described this indirect way of trying to disclose: "There were times when we tried to tell my mother or I did like leave her little hints... Um, I would say something like, oh 'can you come early tonight' or 'do you have to go to work?' Um, I couldn't come out and say it."

*Disclosure Precipitated by a "Breakdown"*

For women and men alike who withheld telling, disclosure occurred later in life and was often precipitated by a "breakdown"

or sometimes a hospital admission. According to one woman: "I couldn't talk about it. There just weren't any words for it. But the therapist I was with was an occupational therapist so she had me doing art therapy. So I was able to actually draw stuff that had happened and get it out that way." A male participant described his disclosure: "Umm, so after the breakdown, I found I was having all these memories. I was being flooded, so eventually I was put in long-term therapy. I was told that's what I needed. . . . Otherwise, my whole life I went through blocking out, umm, reality as much as possible."

While there were strong similarities between the disclosure patterns of male and female participants, noteworthy differences connected to gender also emerged. Specifically, three themes emerged for men that inhibited or precipitated disclosure for reasons related to gender: (a) fear of being viewed as homosexual; (b) feelings profound of stigmatization or isolation because of the belief that boys are rarely victimized, and (c) fear of becoming an abuser, which acted as a precipitant for disclosure.

### *Sexuality and Sexual Orientation as Barriers to Men Disclosing*

All of the men in the study were abused by men when they were children. In two cases, there was more than one perpetrator involved, including a female perpetrator. However, the predominant experience was that of being abused by older males in childhood or early adolescence. The experience of being abused by a same-sex perpetrator strongly shaped the men's experiences about their sexual orientation (were they gay or not?) and factored into reasons for not telling. Male participants in the study provided numerous homosexuality-related reasons for not disclosing:

But I guess it's burning us to keep our mouths shut; it's too embarrassing. . . . Well, you're going to think I'm a f---. And I'm not.

I had never heard the word homosexual in the little community I lived in. So I was quite devastated to understand it wasn't normal when that day these guys were telling me the facts of life.

At the height of the flashbacks and stuff I didn't want to, um, I almost became homophobic because I was afraid that if I went outside, um, people would know something about me that I was gay.

Besides raising questions about their sexuality, they were clear about not disclosing the sexual abuse because of the prevailing

heterosexist/homophobic attitudes they picked up in their environments. In other words, they did not want to be perceived as homosexual if they revealed child abuse by a same-sex perpetrator, which would translate into being homosexual something was not socially acceptable at the time they were growing up.

*Fear of Being Viewed as a Victim*

Another predominant theme with the men included not wanting to be perceived as a victim, which they attributed as a female experience and an undesirable trait. As one male participant recounted, "So in a way by saying to somebody you were sexually abused is the fear of just having that feminine thing attached to you." Another man described that as a child he was already perceived as having feminine features and was referred to in the following derogatory terms: "I was a very thin child with very curly light brown hair and I was called a f---, a girl, um, a sissy, um... . And that just destroyed myself, my sense of self, just I mean brutal [trails off]." He further explained that for him to have disclosed sexual abuse would have meant to be further characterized by this undesirable trait of being a victim and feminine-like. For other men in the study, the prevailing myth that boys do not get sexually abused immobilized them from telling. Even when timing his disclosure in adulthood, one male participant in the study described his dilemma as problematic in the following ways: "There is really no help for men available in the community. There is pretty much f--- zero because apparently men don't get raped."

*Fear of Becoming an Abuser as a Precipitator of Disclosure*

Of interest, one reason for fearing disclosure that later became a precipitant for disclosure is the popularly held notion that boys who are sexually abused have a greater likelihood of becoming sexual offenders as adults. This is clearly illustrated by statements from different participants. "And then you know I said even though I seem well adjusted I just didn't want things coming back from my past to haunt me and you know. My kids were actually the biggest fear. That was my biggest fear, sexually abusing my girls." Another participant described it this way: "What scared me is am I capable of doing what my father did to me? Am I

capable of doing what my uncles did?" While none of the male participants really had a grasp of the research on this subject, they nonetheless had "heard" in various forums that this is a possible effect of CSA (with boys specifically), which led them to disclose to their partners and/or a therapist as a preventative measure.

Two predominant themes emerged with the female participants wherein women appeared to have more difficulties disclosing because: (a) they felt more conflicted about who was responsible for the abuse and (b) they more strongly anticipated being blamed and/or not believed.

### *Women's Feelings of Responsibility*

In weighing whether to tell or not, women seemed to struggle more with how their disclosure would affect others. One woman connected her inability to tell to her feeling that everything was her fault: "I am clear about everything but when I look back what on earth made me not tell. Threats, I was threatened all the time by just everybody. It was like the threat of being loved even less than I was. I had already lost my mother, I was totally traumatized . . . everything was my fault, everything." Another woman, up to the point of the research interview, vacillated in her decision about disclosing and taking action and described her inner dialogue in the following way: "How do you think your mother is going to react to this? How do you think your mother is going to cope with this if you take your dad to court? Think of how your mother is going to feel. Meanwhile, what about me?" As an adult, she had disclosed to members of a therapy group but never to her family.

### *Women's Anticipation of Being Blamed and/or Not Believed*

While both men and women feared being blamed or disbelieved, women recounted this fear as overriding their decision to tell. Women made comments such as the following: "Now when I get older it is the fear of telling because I am being blamed, well you should have done it back then, maybe you don't remember, how can you remember that many years ago. To me it is like a day I can remember it, it was my whole life." While this was a factor for some men, most of them felt they would have been believed

because no man would fabricate sexual abuse at the hands of a male and raise the whole “sexuality question.” As one male participant put it so aptly, “I don’t know how much of a, how big a part that played in me disclosing like whether people would believe me. I don’t think that was the real issue. I think it was more the sexuality thing.”

### **Discussion**

On the one hand, these data reveal that similar dynamics operate for women and men in the process of disclosing. Delaying disclosure, attempting to tell in indirect ways, feelings of shame and blame, and fear of negative consequences for disclosing all played a role in whether they told or withheld telling during their victimization. For some, family dynamics shaped their decisions, and while this aspect of disclosure is important to understand, descriptions of these dynamics are beyond the scope of this article (for a detailed analysis of family dynamics as inhibitors or facilitators of CSA disclosure, see Alaggia & Kirshenbaum, 2005). For others, their attempts to disclose during the time of the abuse simply did not lead to the cessation of their victimization.

Specific to gender, however, differences were reported by participants in profoundly distinct ways. Despite the modest number of men in this sample, the themes that emerged were strikingly similar and clearly apparent. For men, being sexually abused by a male evokes unique conflicts about their sexuality and sexual orientation. Men are strongly affected by prevailing attitudes about masculinity and what it means to be a man in a patriarchal, heterosexist society. They feared being identified as homosexual and being the target of unfair treatment. A few described becoming homophobic (for at least a period of time) and exhibited prejudice against homosexuals. For the men who later identified as being gay or bisexual in adulthood, the trauma of child sexual victimization by a same-sex perpetrator complicated the already complex process of coming out around their sexuality and their choice of life partners. Especially for the men who were homosexual, their first sexual experience being a traumatic one later contributed to sexual dysfunction. These are important findings, because the literature available on male survivors of CSA postulates these reasons for lack of male disclosure but there is no empirical evidence to

support such speculations. While most studies suggest that there are fewer male CSA victims, it may be the case that fewer men disclose because of internal conflicts around their sexuality but also because of environmental impediments.

Of interest, the few women in the study who later identified themselves as lesbian raised the issue of being sexually abused by a male as confusing to them in their sexual orientation but not in their decision to disclose. Of import, after starting to disclose one female participant was adamant in her assertion that she resented people implying that she became lesbian because she had had a bad sexual abuse experience with a man. In fact, she claimed that if sexual abuse by men caused women to become lesbian, "there would be a lot more lesbians in the world!" Clearly, both men and women experienced a loss of control over their sexuality and issues of sexual orientation given their early traumatic experiences.

Additionally, women seem to be affected by a culture of sexist and patriarchal attitudes inhibiting their ability to disclose. They described shouldering the burden of responsibility for their victimization and repercussions of telling. They also more strongly anticipated being disbelieved and blamed for the abuse (or for not stopping the abuse). Fear of victim blaming figured prominently in their narratives. As well, they described being raised with attitudes that children do not count. The phrase "children should be seen but not heard" was often recited by participants as commonly heard throughout their childhoods both at home and at school.

Being viewed as a victim seemed to be more of a concern of the male than the female participants. Again, this may spring from a culture of sexism wherein men who are victims are seen to be weak or somehow lacking, since victimization is associated with being feminine, as a number of male participants pointed out.

### *Limitations*

Asking people to recount events that occurred in childhood is susceptible to memory failure, especially when memories were forgotten, delayed, or repressed and later recovered. Distortion and revision of events are also potential problems in recall. Clearly, this is one constraint of the present study. Corroborating the sexual

abuse through other sources was also not possible in this study. This was largely due to the relatively older subjects and to the fact that very few participants had ever had their sexual abuse investigated by child protection workers. In the few cases where the participant did report that there was child welfare involvement or criminal charges, attempts were not made to access the corroborating documentation. Future investigations might focus on younger victims whose sexual abuse was investigated by police or child welfare authorities and where files would be available.

A purposive sample was used in order to capture a range of experiences for intensive exploration of disclosure processes. However, the nature of the study, which involved probing of highly sensitive material, together with adherence to ethical procedures designed to reduce risk to participants, restricted recruitment and produced a relatively small number of cases. Although 30 cases are typical for qualitative investigations, caution should be exercised in applying the findings. Given the modest number of participants recruited, these results clearly cannot be generalized to the larger population; rather, results can be transferred to other cases with similar characteristics.

### *Implications for Practice*

First and foremost, practitioners need to be aware that gender affects victim disclosure, yet gender as a factor in disclosing child sexual abuse has received little investigative attention. For men, disclosing abuse perpetrated by a man is extremely difficult and shame filled, raising questions about their sexuality, homophobic fears, concerns about homophobic attitudes from others, and fear of potential rejection. These issues need to be acknowledged and worked through in nonjudgmental and sensitive ways. Validating their fears is also important, as they may very well experience homophobic slurs and attacks regardless of their orientation. For both men and women, the gender of the therapist may be an issue as well, and one that the therapist must be mindful of. If the gender of the therapist is the same as that of the abuser, building trust is a more formidable task. Some men in the study reported that they find it easier to disclose to females and experience more reluctance with men. This makes sense, since women might understand the experience of being a victim more empathically and

less judgmentally, as reflected in the data provided by the male participants.

Prolonged delay in disclosure can also signal a loss of control over sexuality and sexual development, especially in terms of sexual orientation or capability of having fulfilling sexual relations regardless of gender. This can be viewed as both a symbolic loss (loss of innocence) and a fundamental loss of control over one's sexuality (forced sex), including a sense of losing one's bodily integrity. For women, delaying disclosure can indicate feelings of responsibility for the abuse itself but also in terms of the impact of disclosing on those around them. Holding back their pain for the sake of others undoubtedly has a profound impact on their sense of self and self-sacrifice. Counseling approaches promoting self-agency and bolstering self-esteem are necessary, especially since survivors are at risk for being revictimized not only sexually but in other ways in their intimate relationships.

Based on the narratives of the study participants, practitioners should be prepared for disclosures of historic sexual abuse given that so many victims only disclose childhood victimization in adulthood. Not surprisingly, clients may initially present with other complaints or problems such as substance abuse, eating disorders, depression, relationship problems, sexual dysfunction, problems with intimacy, and so forth before revealing sexual trauma in childhood. The cumulative effects of ongoing abuse, coupled with the delay in telling one's story, often require intensive therapy that needs to be specialized in terms of addressing traumatic loss. As Herman (1997) so aptly reminds us, "Trauma inevitably brings loss." Mourning the loss of a normal childhood and all that comes with that, and working through this loss, is paramount in work with survivors yet may be the "most dreaded task of this stage of recovery" (p. 188). The bereavement process with survivors of CSA is already complicated since the losses are often invisible and symbolic. This process is made more complicated when the abuse is denied by important people in the survivor's life. Herman (1997) also points out that in traumatic loss the customary rituals of mourning are unavailable or provide little consolation, so remembrance is an important part of therapy.

The narratives of the survivors in this study have a lot to offer in understanding the impact of gender on disclosure of CSA and the implications for therapy, especially around issues of

loss. While there are important similarities, there are also significant differences that need to be heeded. As well, the work of practitioners needs to extend beyond the therapy room, since a number of deterrents to disclosure cited by the women and men in this study involved environmental and cultural conditions.

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